

SERMON - Sunday, 16th May 2021

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 & John 17:6-19

I wonder how you go about making decisions? Not so much those every day decisions of what socks you're going to wear or what cereal you're going to have for Breakfast, but the important decisions that we all face from time to time. What's the best school for my child? What course should I do at college? Is this the right job move for me? Should I take on that post that I've been asked to consider at church? What helps you to make your decision? And how do you know what God wants?

Our reading from Acts this morning, is all about the early church trying to make an important decision. And as we listened to the account of how they chose a successor to Judas Iscariot, we could be forgiven for thinking that it was all a little odd. Did we really just hear that the early church played a game of chance / luck to choose the twelfth apostle? Casting lots? Really? Churches today may draw lots to decide who does a one, two or three year term on a PCC, but we certainly wouldn't use such a crude method to choose our PCC members at our APCM! But the early church seemingly selected their twelfth apostle to continue the most crucial ministry of their Lord by drawing straws.

So, is there anything we can learn from this passage for the way we should go about making choices and decisions? Let's take a closer look, for in doing so, we'll discover that there was a lot more going on here than leaving things to chance.

Judas, you will recall, had hung himself after the death of our Lord, leaving the apostles short of the twelve that Jesus had appointed. The twelve had been Jesus' constant companions, eating and drinking with Him, listening to His teachings, observing how. He healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, and raised the dead. They were "eyewitnesses" to the Lord's glory. They had been instructed by the risen Lord to wait in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit; and just prior to the passage we've just heard, the apostles had witnessed His glorious ascension. Now, here they were, in that gap between His ascension (which we marked this Thursday) and the explosive events that were about to occur with the coming of the Holy Spirit - in what we might call the church's first business meeting. The fledgling church had a vacancy. Jesus had named twelve apostles to carry out the ministry of being His witnesses. But now, there were only eleven, and that seat needed to be filled. So, how were they to go about it?

It is Peter who gets up and takes the lead, presenting the issue before them. And the first thing he does is to turn to the Scriptures.

They turned to the Scriptures (read 17 & 20)

Pointing to two passages from the Old Testament Peter refers to the death of Judas as a fulfilment of prophecy written by David in the Psalms, the second verse "May another take his place of leadership" being a pointer to the need to replace Judas. We may not understand quite how Peter came to see these two bits of the psalms as clear guidance from God on the step needing to be taken, but clearly the passages had spoken to him and probably to others too. The apostles sought to find their guiding principles from God's Word.

And besides the two scriptures Peter cites, there would have been other important principles handed down to them from the Lord, guiding them. The number 12, for example, was seen as a complete number in Scripture. Eleven is not. Jesus, himself, had drawn a parallel between the twelve apostles and the twelve tribes of Israel, when he said in Luke 22:29: "I confer on you a kingdom, just as my father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." The number twelve was clearly significant and it made scriptural sense to replace Judas.

The first thing, then, that the church did was to read the Scriptures and draw on its wisdom.

And for believers today, reading God's word, the Bible, continues to be absolutely at the heart of understanding God's leading and guiding. It's not a case, of course, of just turning to the Bible when we're trying to make a decision, but immersing ourselves in God's word day by day for God's wisdom for life. But as we do so, then, when we find ourselves in a process of discernment, we will find that God often loves to speak to us in some way through the Bible, to help guide us.

The church then used its God-given power of reason / common sense (21-22)

They had to start a selection process. So, before anything else, the question was: who could qualify to be the twelfth apostle? What was the job criteria?

Peter, in verses 21-22 goes on to identify the key qualifications. The replacement apostle had to have been with the other 11 the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among them, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from them. "For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection" (verse 22). The chosen person had to have known the Lord Jesus through his ministry and to be an eyewitness of the Lord's resurrection and ascension.

The selection process clearly narrowed the candidates down to two men: Barsabbas and Matthias. The church had used logic / reason and good sense to narrow their choice down to two people. God has given us minds and intellects and he wants us to use them in our decision-making. I'll be honest, I've always been one of those people who wants God to give me a word from Scripture, or a number of different confirmations when making an important decision. And often God does. But he does want us to trust our judgment as well, and trust that if it's really important, he will show us if we're wrong. In the Ignatian Christian tradition, Ignatius offers several methods for discernment, and one of them is to literally balance the pros and cons for doing something or not doing something. It's a logical process!

So, the fledgling church in Acts 1 had drawn on the wisdom and guidance of the Scriptures, and then used their God-given powers of reason and common sense.

But now, the decision they faced became more difficult because clearly Barsabbas and Matthias were equally qualified for the position. Both were close associates of Jesus and had seen with their own eyes the resurrected Lord. Now they needed something more to discern who was the right person for the job.

And so they consulted God in prayer (23-26)

They called on God for wisdom: 'Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry..."'

And if we look back to verse 14, just before this passage, we'll find something of great significance. We read that "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers." The choosing of the twelfth apostle came out of a community saturated in prayer - days of prayer. Far from just relying on human wisdom or luck they sought God in prayer and asked for his guidance and his will.

When we're making a key decision, we need to seek God in prayer. Not just a one off prayer, but covering the situation in prayer; really offering our choice to God, surrendering ourselves to Him, submitting our lives, our choices, our ideas and hopes to God - so that he has the freedom to instruct our hearts.

Reading the Bible, using our God-given powers of reason and seeking the Lord in prayer.

'Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry..."'

After they had prayed and handed the situation over to God the church took action

"Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles."

Without the three processes they'd already engaged in, it would have been reckless to have made their choice by this method. But, with no clear answer in a situation in which they saw that both people had what it took to be effective as the twelfth apostle, what they were doing here was to trust that the Lord would be sovereign over this simple, practical method of choosing.

And it was a method not uncommon in the Old Testament era.

e.g. In 1 Chronicles 24:5, the people decided on the distribution of priestly offices in the Temple by casting lots; In Joshua 18:10 we learn that the division of land among the twelve tribes of Israel was decided by Joshua casting lots for them in Shiloh in the presence of the Lord.

In the New Testament, in Luke chapter 1, John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, "was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense." Casting lots was a normal practice within the priesthood!

Proverbs 16:33 tells us this - "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord". It wasn't that the faith of God's people was misplaced in "luck,". Rather, faith in God moved them to place everything into His fatherly hands and to trust the outcome solely to Him. The early church, following a traditional practice, was willing to accept God's will for them, and to provide for the continuance of the apostolic ministry.

Now, I'm not suggesting that every time we are making a decision we should cast lots or toss a coin! Of course not! I can't recall another occasion in the New Testament when a decision is made by the church in this way. And really importantly, we need to remember that this was the church in that short time between Jesus's Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. They had not yet been sent the Advocate (the one who Jesus

promised would lead them into all truth). We however, are living in the age of the Holy Spirit, the one who lives within us and leads and guides us.

But, even with the Holy Spirit, as we seek God, He will lead us to make decisions and choices in different kinds of ways in different situations.

So, as well as prayer, God's Word, and using our God-given power of reason / common sense, sometimes, we'll feel it's right to push a door e.g. go for a job interview and see what God does. Other times, we'll feel we should wait and allow God to bring clarity in the matter concerned; sometimes we may experience a deep instinct or peace about a way forward; we may feel it's right to seek further advice from others as part of that discerning process times (as Paul and Barnabas did when they went to the Council in Jerusalem with the vexing question of whether Gentile Christians had to follow the Jewish Law and be circumcised). God also loves to guide us with God-incidences, something that occurs after we've prayed that is an extraordinary co-incidence (but we know isn't!) And of course, He will also at times guide us with prophetic words and pictures, even dreams. We need another sermon to explore all these! But often, God will use a combination of ways to confirm his guidance in our decision making.

But if we have truly offered our situation to God in prayer, then we must trust that God will lead us and have his hand on us as we try to please him. In John 17 vs15 &17, Jesus prayed for all his disciples, "My prayer is that you protect them from the evil one...Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.." Jesus continues to pray for us today that we would be protected from the wiles and misguidance of the evil one and be led into and by truth - God is the source of all truth, and he loves us and wants to lead us in his ways. So, we do not need to fear.

HOW DID THE EARLY CHURCH ADDRESS THE SITUATION BEFORE THEM?

They turned to the Scriptures

They used their God-given power of reason / common-sense

They sought God in prayer

They took action, trusting in God's sovereignty.

Are we facing a significant decision at the moment? Do we need God's guidance? The story of the choosing of Matthias is not a bad model for how we might go about seeking God's will and exercising trust in Him!

